

Testimony of Mark Reinstein, Mental Health Association in Michigan
House Appropriations Committee – Nov. 13, 2013

Chairman Haveman and Members of the Committee,

I'm Mark Reinstein, President & CEO of the Mental Health Association in Michigan, the state's oldest advocacy organization for persons experiencing mental illness. We are affiliated with Mental Health America (Virginia) and partly funded by local United Ways.

I appreciate the opportunity to give input on SB 374.

The Mental Health Association, along with other leading mental health advocacy groups, opposes this bill in the form it came out of the Senate. I regret we weren't in a position to state this during Senate deliberations. I knew of the Attorney General's desire for a new hot-line program, and I had given the Attorney General's office reasons why my organization wouldn't endorse the program as proposed. But none of us in the mental health community knew that a supportive statutory bill was going to be introduced, and we learned of SB 374 too late to try affecting it in the Senate.

SB 374 would establish an anonymous hot-line for reporting the possibility of violent acts toward school students and personnel. State police dispatchers would field the calls and decide whether a referral to law enforcement and/or schools is needed.

If there's a way to prevent an act of mass violence, everyone would want to see such prevention. But if someone is truly a threat for that, we know there's a strong possibility of the individual having a major mental illness. In fact, the research literature tells us that half of the so-called random mass murders in the U.S. over the last several decades have been committed by persons with serious mental illness. Yet SB 374 is devoid of concern for or responsiveness to mental illness. That makes the bill seriously flawed and less effective than it otherwise should be. And that is why the mental health community cannot support it unless significant revisions are made.

We have begun working on possible revisions and would be glad to collaborate with this committee on them. We have also met twice with the Attorney General's office and have written Rep. Haveman on this matter. A copy of the letter to him from five leading statewide mental health groups, including the two statewide groups for children, is attached to my testimony.

In my time today, I'll highlight seven major mental health omissions we see in SB 374.

1. The bill does not recognize potential harm to oneself as a reason for hot-line contact. Persons with serious mental illness are more likely to hurt themselves or be hurt by someone else than they are to harm others. To say that calls in this regard are outside the program won't stop these calls from coming in, and we'd be doing a great disservice to vulnerable at-risk individuals if the project weren't prepared for this.

2. The bill does not specify that training on mental health issues will be part of the preparatory regimen for hot-line dispatchers. When we brought this up to the Attorney General's office and State Police, we were told the dispatchers would be trained, but guaranteeing mental health would be part of that would be too costly.

3. The bill has no provision for handing off a psychiatric crisis call to the emergency mental health hot-lines operated by Community Mental Health Services Programs.

4. There is no provision in the bill for subsequently bringing Community Mental Health or other mental health providers into a case if investigation of that case has shown the existence or likelihood of major mental illness.

5. There is nothing in the bill's outcome data to be reported that involves mental health.

6. The bill lacks adequate confidentiality protection if a report about an individual proves to lack merit. In such circumstances, the individual's name should be completely expunged from the records of all administrative entities within this project.

7. There is no provision for this project to have an advisory committee – something we think would greatly enhance the program – with inclusion of representation from the mental health community.

We respectfully urge you to work with the mental health community on revising this bill to make it more encompassing and effective. We are sympathetic to what SB 374 is trying to do. But without attention to mental health, the bill enables a project incapable of dealing with many of the contacts it will get. And without attention to mental health, an unknown number of our constituents who aren't a threat to self or others will wind up entering the juvenile justice system, where they will encounter an environment emphasizing punishment rather than treatment – an environment funded by the taxpayers of this state.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of our views.

Attachment